Thoughts and Words:
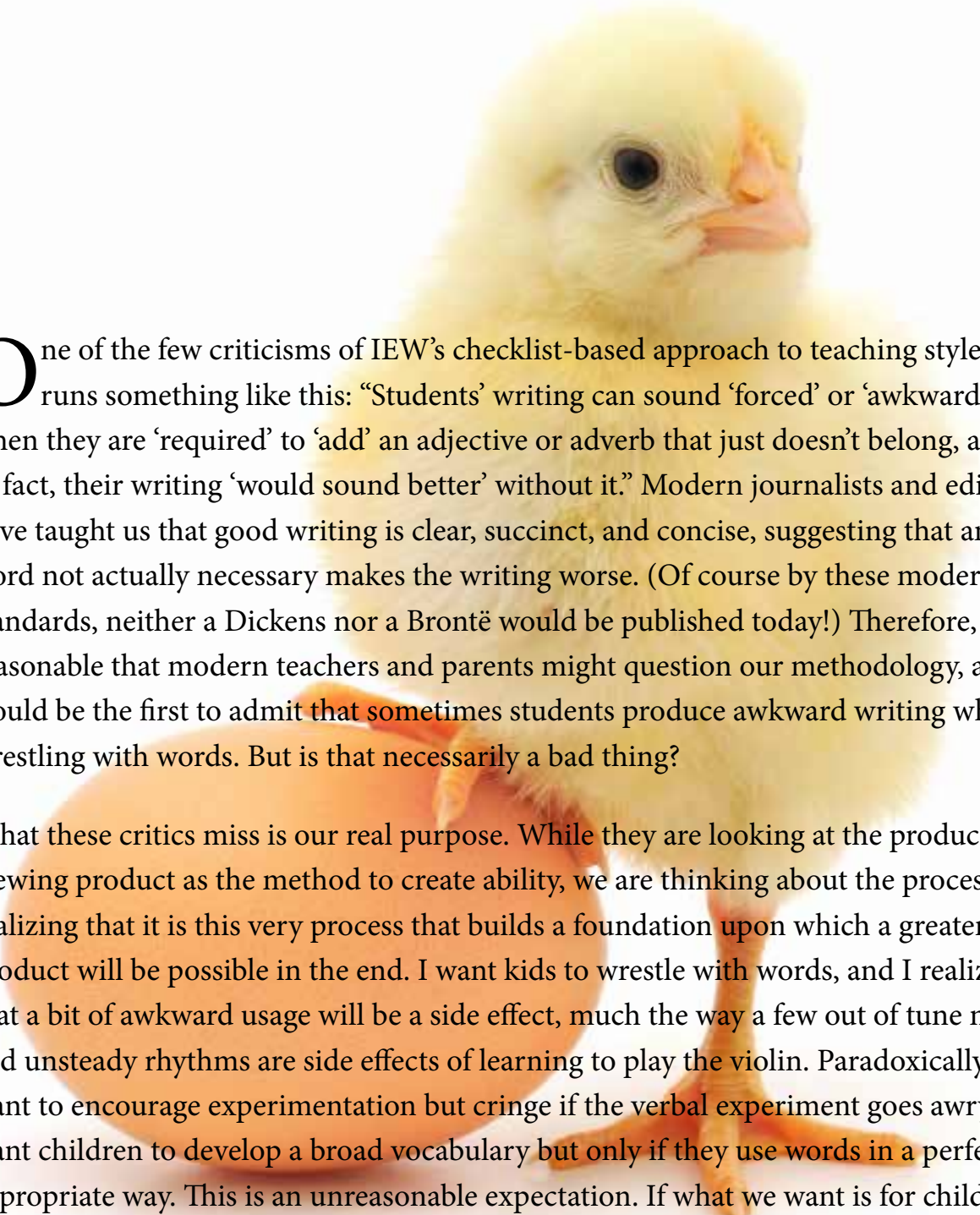## The Chicken or the Egg?

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One of the few criticisms of IEW's checklist-based approach to teaching style runs something like this: "Students' writing can sound 'forced' or 'awkward' when they are 'required' to 'add' an adjective or adverb that just doesn't belong, and in fact, their writing 'would sound better' without it." Modern journalists and editors have taught us that good writing is clear, succinct, and concise, suggesting that any word not actually necessary makes the writing worse. (Of course by these modern standards, neither a Dickens nor a Brontë would be published today!) Therefore, it is reasonable that modern teachers and parents might question our methodology, and I would be the first to admit that sometimes students produce awkward writing when wrestling with words. But is that necessarily a bad thing?

What these critics miss is our real purpose. While they are looking at the product, viewing product as the method to create ability, we are thinking about the process, realizing that it is this very process that builds a foundation upon which a greater product will be possible in the end. I want kids to wrestle with words, and I realize that a bit of awkward usage will be a side effect, much the way a few out of tune notes and unsteady rhythms are side effects of learning to play the violin. Paradoxically, we want to encourage experimentation but cringe if the verbal experiment goes awry. We want children to develop a broad vocabulary but only if they use words in a perfectly appropriate way. This is an unreasonable expectation. If what we want is for children to fall in love with words, we must let them play with language!

Dropping the -ly from these adverbs will transform them into quality adjectives

abrasively	contentiously	fretfully	jokingly	positively	strictly
abruptly	continuously	fundamentally	jubilantly	predictably	stridently
absolutely	coolly	furiously	kindly	pressingly	stubbornly
admirably	cordially	gallantly	laughingly	primarily	substantially
adventurously	courageously	gently	leisurely	probably	successfully
adversely	creatively	gladly	leniently	questioningly	superficially
affectionately	crossly	gleefully	lightheartedly	quickly	surprisingly
aggressively	curtly	gloomily	lightly	quietly	sweetly
agreeably	cynically	glumly	loudly	quizzically	sympathetically
amazingly	deliberately	good-naturedly	lovingly	rapidly	tauntingly
amiably	delightedly	gracefully	luckily	readily	tensely
angrily	delightfully	graciously	madly	reflectively	tersely
appallingly	derisively	gradually	magnanimously	relatively	thrillingly
artfully					tolerantly
assuredly	destructively	gruffly	maliciously	reproachfully	touchingly
astonishingly					tragically
backhandedly		hastily	merrily	resourcefully	tranquilly
begrudgingly	disdainfully		methodically	responsively	triumphantly
belligerently		helpfully	mildly		unabashedly
bitterly	dispassionately			sadly	uncomplainingly
blatantly			miserably	satisfactorily	uncontrollably
blissfully	distinctly	hilariously			undeniably
blithely	distressfully	hopefully	moderately	scornfully	unfalteringly
bluntly		hotly	mysteriously	seemingly	favorably
bountifully	dolefully				unflinchingly
bravely	dramatically	imaginatively		selflessly	unfortunately
brazenly		immediately	nobly		unhappily
brightly	dully	imperceptibly	hotly	seriously	unjustly
briskly	eagerly		nonchalantly	sharply	unluckily
broadly		inadvertently	normally		unquestioningly
brusquely	encouragingly		notably	significantly	unusually
brutally	energetically	inconsequentially	offhandedly	steeply	urgently
calmly					valiantly
carefully		incredulously			vastly
carelessly					vehemently
casually	expectantly	indignantly	peculiarly	sluggishly	victoriously
caustically					violently
charmingly	ferociously	inexplicably	persuasively	softly	warmly
cheerfully					wholeheartedly
cheerlessly					wholly
combatively					wonderfully
comforting					wonderingly
compassionately	frantically	interestingly	pleasantly	splendidly	worriedly
conspicuou	frenetically				wrathfully
contentedly					wretchedly

When we provide children with word lists, synonym lists, and checklists to compel the use of these tools, we are essentially giving young writers the LEGO® bricks of language along with little diagrams to suggest methods of assembly. However, we shouldn't be surprised if the child produces something different than what we expect, for in doing so, he has embraced the words and exercised a bit of originality. Awkwardness is not the enemy; it's a symptom of budding creativity. Usually, this helps the student get excited about words and about writing. In essence we teachers and parents are building their linguistic limestone, nurturing in them the raw stuff from which a better writer can be carved in the future. But we are actually doing even more than that—we are building tools for thought.

A child writes a book report: "This is a very interesting book, because the characters are very interesting, and the author describes them in a very interesting way. The plot is also fascinating, with many interesting twists and turns. Since this is such an interesting book, everyone who reads it will enjoy it. The End." We may groan, but we don't see the real problem. Saying something like "You shouldn't use the word 'interesting' so many times" will have no effect. The reason he is limited in his analysis is because he is limited in his vocabulary. Give him more words, and he can think more thoughts! Give him a critique vocabulary with words like "epic, saga, mystery, tragedy, novel, hero, villain, foil, convincing, consistent, lively, overly evil," etc., and you will now give him tools with which he can categorize and compare the characters, setting, plots, and messages. Word lists aren't merely a convenience; they provide building blocks for better thinking! And they aren't just temporary brain expanders—their effect is lasting, for when a word hops off the list and into the brain and out the fingers and onto the student's paper, he's actually moving that word from his passive to his active vocabulary.

It is the task of the writer to find the perfect words with which to express the thought, but it is the task of the teacher to provide the student with the words that make the very thought possible. You see, it really is not possible to think—or at least to crystallize and communicate—a thought without the words to think it in! And not so surprisingly, one can draw a direct correlation between the sophistication of a civilization and the grammar and vocabulary of its language. Having more words makes more complex thinking possible!

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So if you are teaching children, remember that every day your primary goal is to provide them with eggs of vocabulary, from which the chickens of inventive thinking are certain to hatch. And don't be afraid of the occasional creative word experiment (which may sound awkward to you but is an essential part of learning to play with and love language) because in learning a skill like writing, process trumps product.